

3-2016

Sustainable Development Goals Worth Sharing

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Citation of this paper:

Simpson, Erika (2016) Sustainable development goals worth sharing. *OIDA International Journal of Sustainable Development*, 9:3, March 30, pp. 115-22.

Sustainable development goals worth sharing

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OIDA International Journal of Sustainable Development, Ontario International Development Agency, Canada

ISSN 1923-6654 (print) ISSN 1923-6662 (online)

Available at <http://www.ssrn.com/link/OIDA-Intl-Journal-Sustainable-Dev.html>

Abstract: The international community has agreed upon another set of goals for the next 15 years. On the table are no less than 169 objectives and 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The new aspirations are summarized and the merits and demerits of further elaboration and measurement including country-specific deadlines and targets are discussed. The hefty budget to achieve all 17 goals is estimated at more than \$4 trillion US a year. North American policy-makers need to be aware of humankind's shared aspirations as they consider the new and expensive SDGs. Foreign aid is one of the instruments of North American foreign policy and questions continue to swirl about whether foreign aid should be tied to the purchase of North American goods and services. Canada and the United States are not alone in falling short. They will need to spend more as well as align their national and subnational governments with the proposed SDGs in order to tackle inequality and poverty, integrate environmental and sustainability concerns into decision-making and help develop more global governance approaches to development.

Keywords: foreign aid, global governance, MDGs, sustainable development goals, SDGs

Introduction

The human species is good at setting goals and achieving them. We have walked on the moon, sent a rover to roam Mars—and 15 years ago the United Nations General Assembly agreed to pursue an ambitious set of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) [1]. Good progress on the goals since 2000 [2] has meant the proportion of people living in extreme poverty has been halved from 15 years ago, more than two billion people have gained access to improved sources of drinking water, and remarkable gains have been made in the fights against malaria and tuberculosis. As well, the UN's target for reducing hunger is within reach and the proportion of slum dwellers in the metropolises of the developing world is declining [3]. On the other hand, though there were some notable successes, the MDGs failed to bring about a substantial shift toward tackling global poverty [4]. Another downside was they oversold what foreign aid could achieve—and thus added to pessimism over aid, which was precisely the opposite of their original intention [5].

Now the international community has agreed upon a new set of goals for the next 15 years. On January 1 2016, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development—adopted by world leaders in September 2015 at an historic UN Summit—officially came into force. Over the next fifteen years the SDGs hope to build on the success of the MDGs. On the table are no less than 17 Goals and 169 objectives [6]. The goals summarily range from Goal 1 “ending poverty in all its forms everywhere” to Goal 5 tackling “gender inequality” to Goal 17, strengthening “the global partnership for sustainable development” [7].

This paper overviews the new SDGs as North Americans need to be informed about humankind's shared aspirations. It considers the merits and demerits of elaborating more precisely on the Goals' concepts and measurements including the lack of country-specific deadlines and targets. It asks whether foreign aid—as one of the ‘instruments’ of North American foreign policy—should be ‘tied’ to the purchase of Canadian and American goods and services. And it suggests more and newer approaches to global governance will be imperative if the SDGs are to be achieved by 2030.

The new Sustainable Development Goals:

What are the new Sustainable Development Goals? There is a rich academic literature that debates the overarching concept of ‘sustainable development’ [8]. The term sustainable development was popularized in *Our Common Future*, a report published by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987. Also known as the

Brundtland report, *Our Common Future* included the classic definition of sustainable development: “Development that meets the needs of the present whilst safeguarding Earth’s life-support system upon which the welfare of current and future generations depends” [9].

Sustainable development has been explained and debated by a great number of nongovernmental and international institutions [10]. A large academic and governmental literature tackles the theoretical concepts [11] and methodological issues [12] issues surrounding what sustainable development means and implies. That said, the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are short and succinctly worded—indeed, all 17 far-reaching and ambitious goals have already been summarized into a few paragraphs [13], a UN poster [14] and a one-page summary [15] although their original diplomatic written language is quite lengthy [16].

Goal 1 seeks, by 2030, to eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day. Goal 2 aims to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture. Goal 3 seeks to ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages. Goal 4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Goal 5 aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Goal 6 will ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. Goal 7 seeks to ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all. Goal 8 promises to promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. Goal 9 aims to build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation, and foster innovation. Goal 10 will reduce inequality within and among countries. Goal 11 promises to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Goal 12 seeks to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns. Goal 13 promises to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. Goal 14 aims to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development. Goal 15 seeks to protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification and halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss. Goal 16 strives to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. And Goal 17 promises to strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development.

Many of the 17 SDGs have sub-goals as well so for example, Goal 5 promises to end gender inequality and would ensure many sub-goals including women’s full participation at all levels of decision making and universal access to sexual and reproductive health rights. Goal 17 is similarly ambitious and spells out a host of sub-goals on finance, technology, capacity building and trade. Overall the Goals are more like a lengthy wish list than a legally binding framework with country-specific deadlines and targets.

Findings: Some merits and demerits of the SDGs

There are no established national frameworks and logical sets of steps to take toward the 17 Goals. Individual governments are expected to take ownership and establish national frameworks for the achievement of the 17 Goals. Countries will have the primary responsibility for follow-up and review of the progress made in implementing the Goals. According to the UN, implementing the Goals will require high-quality, accessible and timely data collection. Since the SDGs are not legally binding, individual countries will have the primary responsibility for follow-up and review at the national, regional and global levels [17].

Notably the new Goals are universal and apply to all countries, whereas the MDGs were intended for action in developing countries only. The new SDGs cover more issues with aspirations to address global inequalities in terms of economic growth, ecosystems, industrialization and climate change. The goals cover many dimensions of sustainable development including social inclusion, environmental protection, sustainable consumption and peace and justice.

A 2015 report by the International Council for Science in partnership with the International Social Science Council briefly reviewed the targets from a science perspective and pointed out that many of the targets may also contribute to several goals, and some goals and targets may conflict. “Action to meet one target could have unintended consequences on others if they are pursued separately” and “Research suggests that most goal areas are interlinked, that many targets might contribute to several goals, and that there are important trade-offs among several goals and targets.” For example, progress on ending poverty (SDG 1) cannot be achieved without progress on the food security target (SDG 2). The targets of full and productive employment and decent work under SDG 8 and the reduction of inequality under SDG 10 would need to be met without enhancing resilience to climate change under SDG 13. Success in these will lead to better health and wellbeing, thus contributing to the achievement of SDG 3. But there

could be important trade-offs among targets: For example, an increase in agricultural land-use to help end hunger can result in biodiversity loss, as well as in overuse and/ or pollution of water resources and downstream (and likely negative) effects on marine resources, which in turn could exacerbate food security concerns [19].

Some of the targets are confusing and potentially contradictory. For example, the concept of basic income requires further elaboration to understand what is meant by the elimination of extreme poverty and undernutrition, as well as effective and equitable processes of wealth creation and distribution.

Country-specific baselines and targets are deliberately missing along with country-specific assessments to identify the most urgent priorities. Should individual countries tackle infectious diseases and malnutrition and/or a rapid rise in non-communicable diseases and obesity? What could be the consequences of demographic shifts in nations where either the youth or the elderly predominate? To measure the SDGs using an empirical and positivist framework with a view to testing whether they are achievable would be a challenging, if not impossible exercise. What might be the roles and good practices for subnational governments with respect to the SDGs at the subnational level? Many of the goals are so lofty and immeasurable that they could be missed. If targets are immeasurable and not met, who is to blame? The Goals are unlikely to be realized if the world community neglects to focus on implementation measures from the outset. In short, the SDGs are ambitious commitments but spending plans and country-specific targets for achieving the goals have been left for future negotiations.

Trillions of dollars and more negotiations necessary to achieve Goals

While estimates vary, the hefty budget to achieve all 17 goals is estimated by the U.S. Council of Foreign Relations at more than \$4.5 trillion per year [20]—although to put this enormous figure in perspective that is less than the \$1.7 trillion spent annually on militarism. According to the December 2014 World Summit of Nobel Peace Laureates' Declaration [21]: "Militarism has cost the world over \$1.7 trillion dollars this past year. It deprives the poor of urgently needed resources for development and adds to the likelihood of war with all its attendant suffering." It is unclear how enormous figures like \$4.5 trillion US a year to \$7 trillion annually are arrived at and more importantly, where hundreds of billions in aid will be sought to help pay for the attainment of these goals. Many rounds of future negotiations can be expected to try to come up with unknown amounts of money that must be somehow apportioned to achieve each lofty goal.

North Americans tend to be good global citizens in these sorts of diplomatic negotiations. Back in 1992, Canada played a positive role when heads of states met in Brazil under the strong chairmanship of a Canadian Maurice Strong, who served as UN Secretary-General [22] of the Conference on Environment and Development. They agreed on 21 global priorities. "Agenda 21," [23] as it was called, was based on lessons learned about poverty and conflict during the Cold War and on an emerging awareness about the environment and limits to growth. Since then, many treaties have been ratified extolling widely-admired goals such as biodiversity [24], disarmament [25], sustainable development [26] and people's equality [27].

North America's Development Aid: factors such as tied aid affect aid distribution

North Americans need to be reminded of humankind's shared aspirations as we consider the new and expensive sustainable development goals. And we need to keep that outlook in mind as we think about the factors that should determine where and how North Americans distribute their development aid.

Until 2013, the Canadian International Development Agency was the federal government organization that administered the budget for Canada's official development assistance. Then it was merged into the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development [28]. Renamed the Department of Global Affairs by the newly-elected Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, it is now a complicated hydra with four cabinet ministers—the ministers of global affairs, the minister of international trade, the minister of international development, and the minister of state (foreign affairs and consular)—at its head.

In 2010, President Obama signed the Presidential Policy Directive on Global Development [29], which called for the elevation of development as a core pillar of American power in accordance with diplomacy and defense. The directive sought an integrated approach and the U.S. manages foreign assistance programs in more than 100 countries around the world through the efforts of over 20 different U.S. government agencies [30].

Although foreign aid is one of the instruments of North American foreign policy, voters seldom contemplate foreign aid priorities when they decide how to vote. But for those who do take an interest, questions are swirling about whether foreign aid should be 'tied' to the purchase of North American goods and services. This practice requires

aid funds provided by governments to developing countries—some of the world's poorest countries—be used to procure only North American goods and services.

The OECD and various UN studies estimate that donor money with these kind of strings attached cuts the value of aid to recipient countries by 30 to 40 per cent [31] because they cannot search the international market for the best price. Usually only four countries [32]—Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom—are singled out as donors breaking away from the concept of tied aid. The Canadian government announced in 2008 [33] it would untie all its aid by 2012, but it is unclear whether it succeeded. Critics saw larger objectives of neoliberalization [34], private sector development [35], and mining [36] in both the Obama and Harper governments' approaches to aid.

The 0.7-per-cent target: the U.S. and Canada are not alone in falling short:

As well, the United Nations' Millennium Project [37] urged each donor country to contribute 0.7 per cent of its gross national income to official development assistance. According to the OECD in 2015, the United States continues to be the largest donor [38] by volume with net Official Development Assistance (ODA) flows amounting to \$32.7 billion in 2014, an increase of 2.3 percent in real terms compared to 2013. But US ODA as a share of Gross National Income (GNI) remains at 0.19 percent of GNI, despite the promises of different federal governments—Republican and Democrat.

Similarly in Canada, successive federal governments—Liberal and Conservative—have consistently eroded the official development aid budget until today it is a paltry 0.24 per cent [39] and still declining. The 0.7-per-cent target [40] was originally set by Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson in the 1960s. Famously, U2 lead singer and global poverty activist Bono reminded Prime Minister Paul Martin and then Prime Minister Stephen Harper [41] of that pledge, to no avail.

The United States and Canada are not alone in falling short. Only five countries have achieved the goal: Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. The sixth, the United Kingdom, met it for the first time last year. A historic debate [42] and vote in Britain's parliament committed its current and future governments to spend at least 0.7 per cent of its national wealth on development aid, currently around \$23 billion Cdn. It joins Belgium, Finland, France and Spain in making a commitment to a timetable to reach the target.

Policy imperatives to reach the proposed sustainable development goals:

As wealthy, resource-rich countries, with the world's longest coast lines and the world's most fresh water, Canada and the United States could afford to give much more. Civil society leaders [43] are calling on the United States and Canada to align their development agendas [44] with the proposed sustainable development goals, tackle inequality, integrate environmental concerns into decision-making and take a more holistic approach to development. This means tackling these issues not only abroad but also at home, where we will one day have to answer for child poverty among minority populations in the United States [45] and the poverty endured among First Nations communities [46].

To reach the next 15-year goals by 2030, we will need politicians and policy-makers with the courage to keep their promises and we will need to keep watch on whether those promises are delivered. Academics and policy-makers will also need to help develop the post-2015 Development Agenda. The SDGs need to be formulated at multiple levels, from global to local levels. Governments, supported by business and civil society will need to agree on new intergovernmental processes that could undergird the new SDGs.

Global governance in order to achieve global Goals

Concepts that go beyond national boundaries and interests, like *global governance*, *transnationalism* and the latest new term '*metagovernance*' [47] will continue to be useful in terms of developing coordinated approaches to designing and managing the SDGs. Traditional hierarchical styles of governance are insufficient because complex problems require new styles of communication, different contracts, new covenants, open dialogue, trans-boundary marketing and heightened trust. More ethics, pluralism and tolerance in consensus-style democracies must be developed along with decentralized networks and improved policy coherence. People at all levels of government should think beyond their own national traditions and cultures at the same time as they add more layers of complexity to governance. Everyone will need to design more and better solutions that take a global governance perspective.

The human species is inexperienced and sometimes fails at designing multilevel institutions. The European Union can be characterized as ‘a supranational instance of multilevel meta-governance governing a wide range of complex and interrelated problems’ that is evidently not flawless [49]. Fundamental issues that have impeded the EU are the slow dissipation of the political will to stay together combined with the threat of a British exit along with the possibility of financial meltdowns stemming from problems with EU-members, like Greece, Italy and Portugal. The EU’s ongoing struggle to cope with the Syrian refugee crisis is more evidence of enormous problems made more severe by lack of momentum and less-than-unified determination. Yet without the EU, all Europeans would struggle much more today with truly insurmountable problems that stem from the global financial meltdown and worldwide refugee crisis. The same is true of the UN—for without the UN, we would have to struggle to reinvent it. Rather than jettison newly-emerging global institutions and methods of global governance, like the EU and the UN, we must develop newer styles of consultation and decision-making [49] that improve global governance outcomes.

Conclusion

This study indicates the SDGs are more aspirational philosophies of development that stem from many different and rather competing objectives than inclusive goals rooted in unified political will and momentum. Nevertheless, the new SDGs represent the world’s aspirations and are global goals worth sharing.

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